

**DRAFT Summary of the  
DNR Elk Advisory Committee Meeting**

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**Wednesday, September 27, 2017 -- 9:30 a.m. – DNR Eau Claire Service Center**

**Elk Advisory Committee Members Present:**

Kevin Wallenfang, *WDNR Wildlife Management Big Game Ecologist – Committee Chair*  
Dan Storm, *WDNR Science Services - Ungulate Researcher*  
Kris Johansen, *WDNR WR Area Wildlife Supervisor*  
Kurt Flack, *Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation*  
Peter Bakkan, *WDNR Black River State Forest Property Supervisor*  
Pat Beringer, *WDNR Upper Chippewa Area Wildlife Supervisor*  
Laine Stowell, *WDNR Sawyer County/Clam Lake Elk Biologist*  
Gary Dieck, *Wisconsin Wildlife Federation*  
Scott Roepke, *WDNR Jackson and Clark County/Black River Elk Biologist*  
Dan Eklund, *USFS Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Wildlife Biologist*  
Rich Kirchmeyer, *WI Bowhunters Association*  
Tami Ryan, *WDNR Wildlife Health Section Chief*  
Allen Jacobson, *Wisconsin Conservation Congress*  
Travis Bartnick, *GLIFWC Wildlife Biologist*  
Jon Schweitzer, *Jackson County Forestry and Parks*  
Tim Ginnett, *UWSP, Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs*

**Members Absent:**

Kurt Haas, *WDNR Jackson County Conservation Warden*

**Guests present:**

Lindsey Long, *WDNR State Wildlife Veterinarian*  
Eric Canania, *WDNR Assistant Deer and Elk Biologist*

**Black River 2017 Calf Collaring: Scott Roepke**

Scott summarized the progression and success of the 2017 Black River herd calf searching effort that took place at intervals between May 15<sup>th</sup> – August 7<sup>th</sup>. A total of 30 cows, 2 years or older, were monitored daily for irregular movements that took pregnant cows away from the herd, anticipating calving. Preferred birthing locations generally consisted of clear-cuts on both public and private land. Movement to such locations, along with reduced movement, often indicated a high probability of calving. As opportunity allowed, visual observations and/or telemetry locations of the cow directed search crews to the calf. Approximately 20-25 calves are estimated to have been born. Nine calves were located of which seven were collared (4 males:3 females). The average weight of collared calves was 42lbs (between 1-8 days old). Date of birth was estimated to be between May 25<sup>th</sup> and July 3<sup>rd</sup> while date of conception was estimated between September 22<sup>nd</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup>. As of late September, six of seven collared calves are alive with one unconfirmed mortality of a non-collared calf due to a vehicle collision. Scott suspects that up to seven additional calves may have been born between June 6<sup>th</sup> and August 3<sup>rd</sup> which would make the date of conception between October 5<sup>th</sup> and December 1<sup>st</sup>. Generally speaking, successful calf searches were largely due to locations obtained from GPS collared cows. However, trail cameras, VHF telemetry, visual sightings, tracking methods, and dedicated volunteers were also used in conjunction to locate calves. Challenges associated with calf searching included thick brush and arduous terrain; private lands access; VHF signals not turning on until 8AM; spotty volunteer attendance (50% show up rate) and inconsistent GPS uploads (probably due to thick overhead foliage as uploads were more consistent during the night when elk were feeding in the open).

## **Herd Updates:**

### ***Black River herd: Scott Roepke***

Black River herd is estimated to be 60 individuals (16 bulls). Efforts to fence I-94 are underway with multiple potential funding sources in the works. WDOT has indicated the possibility of assisting in this effort when conducting future road projects. The estimated cost for fencing is approximately \$500,000. The committee discussed fence height, one-way gates, and other structural features. Ag damage caused by elk has been minimal with only two farmers reporting excessive damage. In total, five cranberry bogs have been fenced at a cost of approximately \$250,000.

Scott also emphasized the importance and cooperation of local landowners, and a desire to hold an annual appreciate event to thank, recognize, and update landowners on the elk project. It is hoped that doing so could result in new landowner interest and cooperation on lands where access has been denied. Dan Storm indicated that similar events have been held for deer project cooperators and it has been well received.

### ***Clam Lake Elk Herd Update: Laine Stowell***

The September estimate of the Clam Lake herd is approximately 185 individuals. This total includes the 31 Kentucky elk released this year. Five out of the seven calves born from Kentucky cows were captured and collared while in quarantine. At this time, three Kentucky elk have been killed by predators including: one calf killed by an unknown predator, but likely a bear; 1 calf killed by wolves; and 1 yearling bull killed by wolves. These were the first confirmed cases of wolf predation observed in the expanded elk range since July of 2014. All predation events occurred on young individuals that were either alone or in small outlying groups away from the main herd. Two additional Kentucky cow elk died due to birthing complications while in quarantine.

Since being released, Kentucky elk have stayed relatively close to the release site, with few exceptions of individual animals making extended movements. As of late September, Kentucky make up two main groups. One is comprised of all Kentucky elk while the other group is with a Wisconsin bull and two Wisconsin cows, both with calves. The majority of adult Kentucky elk have joined Wisconsin elk.

Habitat work for the summer included 95 acres of forested openings that were mowed, in addition to 16 acres of planted openings. This work was challenging and lower than past years due to an extremely wet spring/summer.

## **Elk Monitoring:**

### ***Trail Camera Monitoring Update: Dan Storm***

Twenty volunteers placed 83 cameras throughout BRER in a 10X10 (100 grid cell) grid in May. Thus far, camera monitoring success of elk hasn't been optimal in the BRER due to elk not spending a lot of their time in the core of the camera grid. Other issues have included: shifts in elk movement, dead batteries, and full memory cards. A decision has been made to expand the grid to include areas of higher elk use that are close but not within the original grid. A recent change in Snapshot Wisconsin, to allow more landowners to participate in desired areas, has greatly increased interest in Jackson County.

### ***New Elk Traps: Kevin Wallenfang***

Thanks to an RMEF grant, three new elk traps have been ordered, of which two will be used in the CLER and one in the BRER. Traps will be ordered from the same company in Kentucky that built the BRER trap, and RMEF will pay the invoice directly. (follow-up: traps were delivered in December). Friends of Wisconsin Wildlife donated all shipping costs.

### ***Winter Trapping/Collaring:***

#### **BRER – Scott Roepke**

Winter trapping will occur in an effort to target animals that have lost their collar; new calves; and return dispersed elk back into range. Three bulls are without collars and are being monitored by citizen reports, but recollaring them is desired. Scott would like to wait until the winter of 2018-19 to target 2017 calves that aren't collared so they can be fitted with adult collar. However, those same calves, or calves already wearing calf collars, will be collared if they are caught during regular trapping efforts. Darting over bait was successful last

year. This, along with using trail cameras in conjunction with remote trap triggers will allow for selective trapping efforts. There was committee discussion about only ear tagging calves, and concluded with plans to collar all animals captured. Attempts will be made to trap and hold all dispersers in a short timeframe and release them together in hopes that they will group up and stay within the desired elk range.

CLER – Laine Stowell

Attempts will be made this winter to deploy GPS collars on 20 elk within the original Clam Lake groups as part of the wolf/elk study grant provided by RMEF. Potential trapping sites will be baited starting in December.

### ***Spring Calf Search 2018***

BRER: Scott Roepke

2018 spring calf searching/collaring will occur using similar logistics as in 2017.

CLER: Laine Stowell

For elk research purposes, Dan Storm recommends and the Elk Committee supports spring calf searching/collaring for the Clam Lake herd in 2018. Laine states that there are large differences in technique, effort and cost associated with capturing calves with GPS-collared cows vs. VHF-collared cows, and would prefer to monitor GPS-collared cows to minimize effort and workload. The final plan will depend on winter trapping success.

### ***UWSP Research Update: Dr. Tim Ginnett***

Travis Bryan is currently in New Mexico presenting the first half of his research. His graduate project should be completed in December. Dr. Ginnett shared several graphs comparing home range size in time intervals from date of release to one year. There isn't a great deal of difference in relation to this but the study does show that the elk tend to expand their range close to a year after release. Travis is also working on an analysis of habitat and will have a public thesis defense.

The UWSP elk hazing project will soon be underway. The students are all licensed and ready to fly. There have been challenges regarding property access and now with the student's semester workload.

### **Hunt Planning:**

A Clam Lake elk hunt is growing more likely based on current population estimates and future prospects for added animals and herd growth. Logistics are currently being planned including elk hunting regulations and communication/marketing plans. All hunters will be required to attend a pre-hunt orientation/educational session.

### **Elk Rule Changes:**

The department has recently approved a scope statement to eliminate the minimum herd size requirements to initiate a hunt, and the stringent 5% tag allocation. It is hoped that this rule change will be finalized by winter/spring of 2018. Public hearings will be held in Madison, and likely Black River Falls and Park Falls this winter. The committee discussed meeting earlier in the winter to determine a population estimates to allow added time to plan if a hunt is recommended.

### **Health Team Updates:**

Dr. Lindsey Long provided an overview of the health testing procedures used throughout the translocation effort, as well as the main health issues including mortalities that have affected the reintroduced elk populations.

*Babesia odocoilei* – In 2015, Babesiosis, impacted the first animals translocated from Kentucky. Babesiosis is a tick born disease that requires ticks to carry out its lifecycle. *Babesia odocoilei* is a parasite that can attack red blood cells of some cervids. While white-tailed deer are the definitive host, it appears that elk can be exposed to the organism and develop

varying clinical signs from healthy animals to acute death. We suspect that the elk that developed acute disease the first year of the project had little or no previous exposure to the parasite. No further cases from any of the translocated elk have been identified.

**Meningeal Worm** – The primary host for Meningeal worm (*Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*, also referred to as brain worm) is again the white-tailed deer. White-tailed deer and Meningeal worm have developed together so the different stages of the life cycle of the worm can migrate through the body of the WTD causing little to no damage. Unfortunately, other cervids such as elk can become infected with the same organism but they don't give it the same signals to guide its migration. This means elk can develop more severe disease especially behavioral changes that can lead to mortality. Factors that can impact the distribution of this disease include WTD populations and the presence and density of the intermediate hosts (species of snails and slugs). Meningeal worm has been identified or suspected in multiple elk mortalities.

**Dystocia** – This year there were 3 cow elk in the pens that had complications associated with difficult births or dystocia. Many different factors can be associated with dystocia, no infectious organisms were identified in these cases. Twins was the cause of one cow's dystocia, we were able to assist her by pulling the calves during health work-ups. Twin births are very uncommon in elk. Unfortunately, the other dystocia resulted in death to the cows.

### **Elk Reintroduction 2018:**

2018 is anticipated to be the final year of elk translocation from Kentucky. A total of 94 elk have been transported. Capture crew size will be reduced from eight to six members on each of two teams this year. Tami is lining up bait delivery to Kentucky. Caretakers are expected to go down in mid-December to prepare.

### **Elk Management Plan Re-write:**

Based on the wishes of administration, the elk management plan revision will comprise of one statewide elk management plan. Efforts are underway to conduct local focus groups, and to design and distribute a public survey. Intentions are to distribute the survey to 1500 people as early as December. The estimated cost of this survey will be around \$15,000. Discussion was made on whether the survey will be pushed statewide or if it'll be targeted. A targeted survey effort will focus on individuals who are most likely affected by elk. Dan Storm favors the targeted approach as a statewide survey is not salient. Most of the committee agrees with the targeted approach but would like to incorporate a mixed survey approach to ensure that all stakeholders are taken into consideration.

### **Partner Updates:**

#### ***RMEF: Kurt Flack***

RMEF has approved the Project Advisory Committee projects submitted earlier in the year. They currently have \$148,000 from last year's PAC that has been allocated, but not yet spent. The organization is exploring some land protection projects that include a property near the Snipe Lake acquisition in Sawyer County.

#### ***Jackson County Forestry and Parks: Jon Schweitzer***

The 360-acre parcel in Jackson County will be open to the public. They have been conducting habitat work in the area, but work on one location has been halted due to the discovery of a Massasauga rattlesnake on the parcel.

#### ***U.S. Forest Service: Dan Eklund***

The USFS has done 150-160 acres of habitat management for elk and has put in a new and considerably large proposal for consideration by the PAC. They are hoping to see their first timber sale of the Black Torch area which will be very beneficial for elk. The next timber project will be near the Moose Lake elk group.

#### ***GLIFWC: Travis Bartnick***

Elk restoration was featured in the quarterly issue of GLIFWC newsletter. They also had a booth at the Minnesota state fair that included elk reintroduction efforts. GLIFWC again is planning to contribute financially toward the translocation elk feed in 2018.